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One in 12 older people are prescribed the wrong drug

Americans aged over 65 stand an 8% chance of being prescribed inappropriate drugs when they visit their doctor's surgery or a hospital outpatient department, a similar rate to that in 1995, a new study has found.

The risk is twice as high for women and may be worse among patients in nursing homes, and the finding probably underestimates the problem, the study's author, Dr Margie Rauch Goulding, a health statistician at the National Center for Health Statistics, told the *BMJ*.

The study, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* (2004;164:305-12), showed that inappropriate prescribing occurred in 16.7 million doctor visits in 2000, with patients getting at least one inappropriate drug.

Dr Goulding's study compared trends in inappropriate prescribing in 1995 and 2000. The rate of inappropriate prescribing did not improve. It was 7.8% in both 1995 and 2000, she said. The three drugs that are a "large and persistent part of the problem" are the pain reliever propoxyphene, the antidepressant amitriptyline, and the anti-anxiety agent diazepam.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Pregnant women should have two scans, Scottish agency says

All pregnant women in Scotland should be routinely offered two ultrasound scans to check the health of the fetus, a Scottish NHS agency has recommended. Currently the service is offered by just over half of Scotland's maternity units.

NHS Quality Improvement Scotland (NHS QIS) has carried out a full assessment of the clinical and cost effectiveness of routine ultrasonography in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. It has concluded that a system that offers scans in both the first and



Officials warn of looming humanitarian crisis in Darfur province of Sudan

The recent escalation of fighting in western Sudan's Darfur province has led to a crisis in one of the world's most inhospitable regions, with thousands of people fleeing into the desert. Agencies have been able to reach only 15% of people in need, with some three million people remaining beyond access.

The United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports: "Half of Darfur's six million people are directly affected by the conflict. The number of people who have fled from Darfur to Chad has nearly doubled to 110,000 in the past three months. More than 700,000 people have been internally displaced in the past year."

OCHA says it has "consistently received reports of systematic raids against civilian populations." It adds: "These attacks have reportedly included burning and looting of villages, large-scale killings, and abductions. Humanitarian workers have also been targeted, with staff being abducted and relief trucks looted."

Christiane Berthiaume, spokeswoman for World Food Program, says: "All the ingredients for a humanitarian crisis are there—difficult access, not enough food or water, and nightmare logistics."

Peter Moszynski *London*

second trimester is the most efficient method of detecting fetal abnormalities.

Introducing such a system across Scotland is expected to push up the costs of ultrasonography by more than 50%—from the current £6.3m (\$11.9m; €9.3m) to £9.6m. Discussions are taking place between NHS QIS and the Scottish Executive about implementing the recommendation.

The recommendation in Scotland is in line with guidelines produced by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in England and Wales in October last year (*BMJ* 2003;327: 1009).

Bryan Christie *Edinburgh*

Routine Ultrasound Scanning Before 24 Weeks of Pregnancy is available at www.nhshealthquality.org

Coughing can reduce pain of injection, study shows

So, how can patients be distracted from the pain of an injection? Many tactics have been tried, including cartoons, hypnosis, music, jokes, and counter-pressure, but doctors now report high success rates with a simple cost-free and risk-free strategy that requires no specialist equipment—coughing.

As the needle comes into contact with the skin, the patient is urged to cough vigorously. That cough, say the doctors, in an article published online ahead of print in the *British Journal of Plastic Surgery* (www.bjps.com), may provide distraction and

momentarily increase blood pressure. The authors say that it has been established that hypertension can reduce pain perception.

The authors, from St Thomas's Hospital, London, Norfolk and Norwich University, and Wycombe General Hospital, say that although there is little doubt that distraction works, the exact mechanism has not been established. It may, they suggest, be explained by the gate control theory of pain, and that stimuli travelling along fast nerve fibres partially override painful sensations travelling along slower nerve fibres.

These findings add weight to the results of another recent study that showed that coughing relieves pain when blood is being taken (*Anesthesia and Analgesia* 2004;98:343-5).

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

New body aims to give public a bigger voice in shaping health care

Doctors and professional bodies should expect a "challenging relationship" with a new patients' watchdog body whose goal is to make the NHS in England more accountable to and more reflective of the needs of the public.

Speaking last week at the launch of the new Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health, which takes over from the now defunct community health councils, its chairwoman, Sharon Grant, warned that doctors and managers must take heed of patients' power. She said the NHS, which was "designed for a paternalistic society 50 years ago," needs to change.

The commission will oversee the new network of independent complaints advocacy services, which will take over the main role of the old community health councils.

It will also supervise and oversee the 572 patient and public involvement forums across England that will scrutinise and inspect all local NHS organisations and independent sector